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Literary Works and the Metaphysics of Influence

Abstract: When interpreting literary works, interpreters almost always rely on connections between the literary works and other aspects of our world – e.g., historical time periods, cultures, other artworks, artistic movements, and so on. But how can we explain both the nature and role of these connections? I argue that this can be fruitfully explained with reference to relations that exist between literary works and other aspects of human culture, which is a class of relations that I call 'interpretation-relevant relations.' I also argue that an important component of these relations is a mind-independent connection of influence between the relata. Finally, I argue that these interpretation-relevant relations (with the component of influence) can be taken to be real, mind-independent elements of the world, if we recognize that literary works are public artifacts and so are part of the fabric of human culture, which depends on human minds for its existence and persistence but not for its ontological nature. All of this can hold even if interpretations are the products of individual minds interacting intentionally with literary works.

Keywords: literary work; public artifact; cultural entity; interpretation-relevant relations; interpretation; influence.

Introduction

Consider three examples of literary analysis. Jane Nardin details the significant connection between Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and Victorian society:

> I wish to argue that *The Turn of the Screw* can be read as a tale which exposes the cruel and destructive pressures of Victorian society, with its restrictive code of sexual morality and its strong sense of class consciousness, upon a group of basically sane and decent individuals.[1]

For her to make such an argument, Nardin must extensively detail what the narrative of *The Turn of the Screw* has in common with Victorian society.

Chantel Lavoie analyzes the similarities and differences between J. K.

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[1] Jane Nardin, "'The Turn of the Screw': The Victorian Background," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 12, 1 Literature and Ideas (Autumn 1978): 131–132.

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Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Suzanne Collins's *The Underland Chronicles*, focusing on the treatment of prophecy in each. In the introduction to her article, Lavoie writes the following:

> And in both texts under discussion here, mercy is powerful enough to outweigh prophecy. Yet I argue that there is a significant difference between Rowling and Collins in concepts of sin and crime, in that Rowling is concerned with both, and Collins only with the latter, which in turn colors their arguments about justice and mercy.[2]

In support of this claim, Lavoie details many similarities and differences in the details of the two series which have to do with prophecy, justice, and mercy.

In analyzing *the Hunger Games* trilogy, Antje M. Rauwerda argues that the "choices, concerns, and experiences [of the protagonist, Katniss,] express the challenges of being female in a military context."[3] In making this argument, Rauwerda spells out connections between the details of the narrative and aspects of military culture, including, but not limited to, the experiences of girls and women in military environments.

Of course, I have given only three examples of how interpreters of literary works use connections between the works they are analyzing and what I shall call other 'cultural entities'[4] as a central tool for studying and interpreting literary works.[5] But it is possible to discover numerous other examples of interpreters doing exactly the same thing for these and other literary works by reading nearly any piece of literary criticism.[6] It is clear that efforts to track connections between literary works and other cultural entities – which are external to the world of the literary work – play a significant part in the ways interpreters (both lay and professional) analyze and interpret literary works. Indeed, despite the fact that it is nearly always impossible for anyone to ever be certain that some particular observed connection actually holds between a literary work and some cultural entity (actually possessing all the features attributed to it), interpreters rely on these connections when generating their interpretations.

From a metacritical and philosophical point of view, this common practice in

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[2] Chantel Lavoie, "Rebelling Against Prophecy in 'Harry Potter' and 'The Underland Chronicles,'" *The Lion and the Unicorn* 38, 1 (2014): 46–47.

[3] Antje M. Rauwerda, "Katniss, Military Bratness: Military Culture in Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games Trilogy," *Children's Literature* 44 (2016): 172.

[4] The class of cultural entities includes paradigmatic examples of cultural artifacts like artworks and tools but also includes the many aspects of cultures that vary in their substantiality like social institutions and prevailing attitudes and beliefs.

[5] Note that defining the term 'literary work' and the nature of the corresponding ontology is controversial. See Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Ch. 2, and Amie Thomasson, "The Ontology of Literary Works," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Noel Carroll and John Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 302–312. In this paper, I operate with the assumption that my readers have a general idea of what I mean by 'literary work.'

[6] For the purposes of this paper, I am restricting my argument to fictional literary works and literary criticism about fiction.

the study of literature raises some questions. First, how can the nature of the connections between literary works and other cultural entities be explained? Second, how can the nature of the role that these connections play in the practice of interpreting literature be explained? I propose that both of these questions can be fruitfully answered with reference to relations that metaphysically exist between literary works and other cultural entities. This is a class of relations that I call 'interpretation-relevant relations.' However, in order for this proposal to succeed, there are some further questions for which answers must be provided.

If we take it to be accurate that an important aspect of interpreting literary works is the use of relations between those works and other cultural entities, then we should ask whether these relations are constructed by interpreters or exist independently of the interpretive activity. Although taking the second option has a complication, my aim in this paper is to show that option to be defensible and appealing.

The complication for taking relations to exist independently of interpreting minds is that a component of those relations must be a connection of influence between the relata that obtains without an intermediating mind. That is, supposing that the relations exist independently of interpreting minds has the consequence that we must also say that entities like literary works, cultures, other artworks, artistic movements, and so on can have connections of influence between each other without any mind ever recognizing those connections. This is because observing the influence that literary works and other cultural entities have on each other is a central component of interpreting literary works. Thus, it is important to ask how this mind independence is possible. How is it that interpretation-relevant relations, with a component of influence, seem to have an independent metaphysical existence, ready for interpreters to use these relations in their analyses of literary works? In this paper, I will argue that if we appeal to literary works' status as a type of cultural entity called cultural artifacts, and then further narrow the class to what Amie Thomasson calls 'public artifacts,'[7] there is no problem with taking literary works to stand in interpretation-relevant relations with other cultural entities, a component of which is connections of influence.

Interpretation-Relevant Relations

It is an assumption of my proposal that relations operate in our world. Given that assumption, we can say that literary works stand in relations with other entities in our world. A subset of these relations has the potential to support interpretations of literary works. I call these interpretation-relevant relations. A brief look at literary interpretive practice reveals that when people analyze literary works, a significant part of their process is attempting to spot and elucidate these relations.

The examples with which I introduced this paper have given some idea of the kinds of entities with which literary works can stand in interpretation-relevant

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[7] Amie L. Thomasson, "Public Artifacts, Intentions, and Norms," in *Artefact Kinds: Ontology and the Human-Made World*, ed. Maarten Franssen, Peter Kroes, Thomas A. C. Reydon, and Pieter E. Vermaas (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2014).

relations, but it is worth spelling out the idea in further detail. I call these entities cultural entities in reference to their common trait of being part of human culture (shared with literary works) despite their varied ontological natures. It is important to note that cultural entities have an ontological identity independent of whether or not they are related to a particular literary work. Their standing in such a relation is merely a contingent matter.[8] The relations between cultural entities and literary works place literary works in contexts. They include: the intentions and other mental states of the author, other works written by the same author or other authors, the literary movement in which a work is situated, the culture of the society in which the work was produced, and the culture of the society in which the work is being read/heard/observed and then interpreted. These are just some examples. I do not think it is possible to enumerate all the entities with which literary works may stand in interpretation-relevant relations because, due to literary works being part of human culture, it is possible for anything that is also part of human culture to stand in an interpretation-relevant relation with a literary work.

There is one more important detail to note regarding my claim that literary works are capable of standing in interpretation-relevant relations with other cultural entities. This is that it has no significant consequences for the ontological nature of literary works or the other cultural entities. Two entities can stand in relations with each other regardless of either one's ontological status—a non-existent unicorn can stand in a relation of similarity and difference with an existent horse. So, the precise ontological nature of any of the relata is immaterial to their being able to stand in relations with each other. The important idea is that literary works do stand in relations with other entities in our world, and some of these relational connections are significant because they highlight certain features of the literary work in an illuminating manner. Those significant relations are what I call interpretation-relevant relations.

Mind-Independence and Connections of Influence

If relations between literary works and cultural entities are mind-independent, then they must exist whether or not any mind has ever considered them. But, if interpretation-relevant relations exist mind-independently between literary works and other cultural entities, then a component of the relations must be a connection of influence between the relata existing regardless of any human minds. But then how is it that interpretation-relevant relations, with a power of influence existing between the relata, seem to have an independent metaphysical existence, ready for interpreters to use these relations in their analyses of literary works? Explaining how this is possible is the purpose of this section.

Assuming realism about relations generally (i.e., that relations exist

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[8] Note that it is possible, but likely not the norm, for a cultural entity to stand in interpretation-relevant relations with all literary works.

mind-independently), it is a truism that everything is related to everything else. Thus, it is likewise trivially true that literary works, being things that (regardless of their ontological nature) exist in our world, relate to other things in our world. Interpretation-relevant relations, then, are merely a subset of all the relations in which literary works stand with other things in our world. This means that interpretation-relevant relations are not anything unusual that require some special metaphysical moves in order to be incorporated into our overall account of the metaphysics of the world. They are a subclass of a much larger class that is standardly taken to be part of the basic fabric of our world. However, this is not the end of the story for interpretation-relevant relations. Not only are interpreters apparently able to recognize some relations as interpretation-relevant from among all the relations in which literary works stand, but it seems mysterious how a process of influence operates within these relations, given that the relata vary in their ontological natures and (with the exception of the author) are not capable of cognition.

I propose that interpreters recognize some relations in which literary works stand as interpretation relevant by being aware that literary works – like all artworks – are cultural human artifacts and interpreting them in virtue of this fact. More specifically, literary works are public artifacts (a la Thomasson), which is a subclass of cultural artifacts.[9] According to Thomasson, it is both a causal fact and a conceptual truth that "artifacts must be the products of human intentions, indeed of intentions to produce something of that very kind."[10] In other words, all artifacts require human intentions, but public artifacts are distinct in that they "do not depend merely on the individual intentions of their makers; they also depend on public norms."[11]

This view of literary works as public artifacts has many features in common with other views regarding the ontological nature of literary works. For instance, Stein Haugom Olsen argues that the existence of a literary work relies on the social practices of the community to be understood as a literary work and interpreted properly.[12] Likewise, Peter Lamarque argues that literary works are institutional objects that are governed by the social conventions of production and reception,[13] and Gregory Currie argues that literary works are representational artifacts that are crafted by the authors' intentions in order to convey a story.[14] I choose to appropriate Thomasson's view of artworks as public artifacts because I believe that it does the best job of succinctly conveying these ideas in a metaphysically clear manner, but the following over

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[9] Thomasson, "Public Artifacts, Intentions, and Norms."

[10] Amie L. Thomasson, "Artifacts and Human Concepts," in *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and their Representation*, ed. Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53.

[11] Thomasson, "Public Artifacts, Intentions, and Norms," 47.

[12] Stein Haugom Olsen, "Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice," in *The End of Literary Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 11–12. Olsen, "Defining a Literary Work," in *The End of Literary Theory*, 80–81.

[13] Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 78–79.

[14] Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5–8.

all idea is shared by philosophers studying literary works and artworks generally. All literary works are artworks, and all artworks are artifacts.[15] This means that they are intentionally created by one or more individuals working within a social/cultural environment, and this context influences what is created, how it is created, and how it is received by members of the culture (which collectively generates how it is received by the culture as a whole).

In elaborating her view, Thomasson writes that public artifacts are "dependent on public norms regarding how we are to treat them, to behave regarding them, and so on; they build in reasons for acting in some ways rather than others."[16] This includes "the object being recognizable (by an intended audience) as to be treated, used, regarded, etc. in certain ways," and accordingly "makers intend their creations to be recognized by an appropriate audience so that that audience may treat them properly, subjecting them to the relevant norms regarding how the object created is to be treated or regarded."[17] Thus, taking literary works to be public artifacts situates them firmly in the external world of human culture that, though it is dependent upon human minds for its existence and persistence, nonetheless consists of entities that, once they are produced, are external to any particular human mind.

Once literary works are understood as public artifacts that exist as part of human culture, it becomes apparent that literary works are related to many aspects of culture. Most clearly, a literary work will be related to the public norms that the author intends to represent in their work. For example, the norm in Victorian culture that women cannot marry if they have been tarnished by another man is represented in *Pride and Prejudice* when Lydia runs away with Mr. Wickham and the Bennet family scrambles to ensure that they marry. Jane Austen clearly intends for the reader to understand this public norm, and the representation of this norm in the novel is an instance of a manifest relation between a cultural norm and a work. This intention by Austen is exactly the sort of creator intention discussed by Thomasson as something which is intended to be recognized by an appropriate audience. The relation between Victorian norms about marriage and the events represented in *Pride and Prejudice* does not rely upon Austen's mind or the mind of any particular reader; instead, it is a publicly accessible relation that can be recognized and shared by any audience member as long as she has the relevant knowledge about the norms of Victorian culture.

Given the discussion of the four previous paragraphs, we can say that literary works are first and foremost part of the fabric of human culture. So, when interpreters work to understand and explain something about a work – whether the work as a whole or some specific element of it – it makes sense to look at how the work relates to other aspects of human culture as part of this analytical process. This is not required and is not always done, but it is common and natural for interpreters to

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[15] Saying that all literary works are artworks does not necessarily mean that all works of fiction, poetry, or drama are artworks. These classes may come apart. However, regardless of their status as artworks, all narrative or poetic works will be included in the class of artifacts.

[16] Thomasson, "Public Artifacts, Intentions, and Norms," 60.

[17] Ibid., 52–53.

use observations about how literary works relate to other aspects of human culture, as I illustrated in the introduction. These relations between literary works and other aspects of human culture are the subset of all the relations in which literary works stand that can be interpretation-relevant. For a relation to be interpretation-relevant, it must relate a literary work to some aspect of human culture. This is because what distinguishes interpretation-relevant relations is that they reveal something interesting about a literary work that is useful in the process of trying to understand it, and – as literary works are part of the fabric of human culture – it is their relations with other aspects of human culture that can accomplish this. Thus, interpretation-relevant relations are a subset of those relations in which a literary work stands with other elements of human culture. Due to their awareness that literary works are cultural public artifacts, interpreters of literary works naturally recognize the fact that in order for a relation to reveal something interpretively interesting about a literary work, it must hold between that work and some other aspect of human culture.

At this point, an objection could be raised against my claim that interpretation-relevant relations only hold between literary works and other cultural entities. It may seem that interpretation-relevant relations exist between literary works and aspects of the natural world in virtue of the presence of descriptions of the natural world in literary works. My response to this objection is that what is represented in literary works is not the natural world itself but rather the natural world as perceived or experienced by human beings. Such perceptions and experiences are part of human culture – i.e., it is part of human culture how humans relate to the natural world. Once a person begins to interact with some aspect of the natural world (even merely through observation and description), that aspect of the natural world has been appropriated as part of that person's experience, and as that person is a component of her culture, it has become an aspect of the natural world as related to human culture. Thus, there can never be direct relations between literary works and aspects of the natural world.

I have established that interpretation-relevant relations can exist mind-independently in the world and be recognized by interpreters of literary works, but if this is true, it follows that the relata in these relations must have the ability to influence each other's contents. This is because it is the influence that other aspects of human culture have on literary works that interpreters observe and use when they incorporate interpretation-relevant relations into their analyses of literary works. To refer back to the examples from the introduction, when Nardin argues that *The Turn of the Screw* can be read as a tale which exposes the cruel and destructive pressures of Victorian society,"[18] she looks at the contents of the narrative of *The Turn of the Screw,* she looks at the details of Victorian society, and she shows how the latter are reflected in the former. In doing this, Nardin observes how Victorian society appears to influence *The Turn of the Screw* and uses that observation in her interpretive analysis. Likewise, when Lavoie argues that there is an interesting and important difference in the treatment of prophecy in *Harry Potter* and *The Underland Chronicles* and that

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[18] Nardin, "'The Turn of the Screw': The Victorian Background," 131.

this is related to a corresponding difference in the views regarding justice and mercy that are expressed by the two series, Lavoie looks at the contents of each narrative and observes how there are connections of both similarity and difference making up a complex relation between them. When observing the two works side-by-side, we see that each work influences how the contents of the other work appear to a reader. Furthermore, note that this example shows that chronology of production need not be relevant to whether influence flows in one direction versus the other between two cultural entities. How this is possible can be explained by the fact that all cultural entities are both products of and additions to human culture, which necessarily makes some details of how influence operates them mysterious.

I have said that if interpretation-relevant relations are in the world mind-independently, then literary works and other aspects of human culture must have the ability to influence each other. I have discussed why this must be the case, so it is time now to consider how it is possible. Again, the idea that literary works are cultural public artifacts helps resolve the puzzle. It explains how literary works can be influenced by, and also influence, other aspects of human culture. Because literary works are produced by humans who are living and creating things within cultures, literary works become part of one or more human cultures when they are produced. This means that as soon as a literary work comes into existence (whenever that may be) it becomes part of the wider human culture. In other words, it becomes part of a vast web of artworks, material objects, practices, attitudes, and so on that make up human culture(s). Furthermore, this web is not static but rather is constantly shifting and changing, because it is dependent upon humans for its existence and persistence, and humans are constantly performing actions that have cultural effects.

Every element in this cultural web can be said to have contents, which is the stuff that is bundled together and given a label, like 'Victorian society' or 'Christianity' or 'military culture' or 'gender roles and norms.' It is perhaps most common to talk about creative works as having contents, because for these it is relatively easy to say what is in the work and what is not. For example, in *Harry Potter* (or as part of the contents of *Harry Potter*), there are some people who are born with magical abilities – and they are called 'wizards' or 'witches' – and there are other people who are not born with any magical abilities – and they are called 'muggles' or 'squibs.' I could enumerate many things that all readers of *Harry Potter* would agree are part of the contents of that seven-part narrative. However, it is not part of the contents of *Harry Potter* (or it is not in *Harry Potter*) precisely how many pairs of socks Harry wears throughout the seven books, despite numerous references to socks throughout the series. I am suggesting that we can say something similar about all cultural entities – i.e., that there are some things that are within that entity, and those things make up its contents. For example, Victorian society includes as part of its contents cultural attitudes, beliefs, and customs, such as: a particular way of practicing Christianity and its associated beliefs and attitudes, a patriarchal social framework wherein women are subject to men (their fathers and brothers until they marry and then their husbands), a moral and

social emphasis on sexual purity for women, and much more. Of course, for entities like Victorian society or Christianity, the boundary between what is part of its contents and what is not will be even less clear than it is for artifacts like literary works, films, or paintings. However, it will still be possible to point out some paradigmatic examples of things that clearly are and are not part of the contents of a particular cultural entity, just as with literary works and other works of art. Thus, it should be clear that it makes sense to talk about all cultural entities as having contents.

Given that literary works are part of the fabric of human culture and given that all entities which make up human culture have contents, it is the similarities and differences in contents that make it possible for literary works and other cultural entities to influence each other. Cultural entities share relational connections of similarity and difference which arise directly from similarities and differences in their contents, and these connections of similarity and difference give rise to observable connections of influence between those cultural entities. Every cultural entity is in some ways similar to and in some ways different from every other cultural entity. So, when a person studies a particular cultural entity, she observes some of those similarities and differences existing between that entity and some other cultural entities, and she draws out the implications this has for the cultural entities concerned. In so doing, she reveals the shared cultural stitching that connects those cultural entities, which is the influence they have on one another. In other words, influence between cultural entities, like that between *The Turn of the Screw* and Victorian society, operates conditionally – if some mind happens to encounter the relation of similarity and difference between *The Turn of the Screw* and Victorian society, then that mind will reveal a further layer to the relation between these two entities, which is the layer of influence. That further layer of influence is observable because of the entities shared metaphysical location in human culture. But, within human culture it is impossible to track the spread of influence at a minute level due to the vastness and complexity of the overall fabric of culture.

What I have said about influence between cultural entities being revealed by people in their process of analyzing the cultural entities may sound as though I am advocating a form of constructivism, wherein the relations are constructed when people study cultural entities. But this is not what I am advocating. Note first that I said cultural entities have contents. This means that I am committed to those contents being a part of the cultural entities and not to their being produced by people in their process of analyzing the cultural entities. Furthermore, I said that the contents of cultural entities are similar to and different from one another. This then also means that I am committed to the idea that facts of similarity and difference are true of the cultural entities themselves regardless of whether any mind ever observes those similarities and differences, and so are not constructed by minds interacting with the cultural entities. Finally, I said that connections of influence between cultural entities operate conditionally, wherein if a mind were to become aware of the similarities and differences existing between two cultural entities, then that mind would observe a connection of influence. This means that the connection of influence is always there

ready to be observed.

Conclusion

I have argued that interpretation-relevant relations between literary works and other cultural entities are a central element in many interpretations of literary works. Second, I have argued that an important component of these relations is a connection of influence between the relata. I have also argued that these interpretation-relevant relations (with the component of influence) can be taken to be real, mind-independent elements of the world, and this can hold even if literary works are the result of intentional acts of authors and interpretations are the products of individual minds interacting with literary works. To make this argument, I have appealed to the commonly accepted weak metaphysical claim that literary works, regardless of whatever else we may take them to be ontologically, are at the very least cultural artifacts and more specifically public artifacts (a la Thomasson). I have shown that in being public artifacts, literary works are part of the mind-independent fabric of human culture, depending on minds for their existence and persistence but not for their ontological nature. This means that interpretation-relevant relations can be real, mind-independent relations that form between publicly accessible, mind-independent literary works and other cultural entities. Furthermore, these relations form the basis for interpretations of literary works, even if the interpretations are constructed by interpreters. Thus, as a metaphysical matter, cultural entities can be said to mind-independently influence literary works and these relations of influence can then serve as the basis for interpretations of literary works.

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